
The Cook County Adult Probation Department Responds to a Reduced Budget

Operating under the Office of the Chief Judge of the Circuit Court of Cook County, Illinois, the Cook County Adult Probation Department (CCAPD) administers a wide range of programs covering both standard and specialized probation supervision as well as pretrial services. Most department resources are dedicated to probation supervision. The department receives an average of nearly 20,000 new probation cases each year and has an active caseload of about 32,000 probationers, 94% of whom have been sentenced for felony offenses. Approximately 90% of probationers are assigned to standard supervision, while 10% are in specialized programs designed for specific offender populations. The average standard probation caseload is 130 probationers, and caseloads in specialized programs range from 35 to 80. The department also supervises 8,000 pretrial defendants annually and completes over 5,000 presentence investigations each year. Working out of 17 office locations, CCAPD has approximately 800 employees (about 500 of whom are probation officers) and an annual budget of \$43.7 million.

*Michael Bacula,
Executive Assistant,
Cook County Adult Probation
Department*

This year, for the first time in recent history, CCAPD's budget was reduced. Although the budget reductions being experienced by CCAPD may not be as severe as those facing other departments, they are nonetheless affecting operations. To continue to provide meaningful services in this environment, the department is adjusting strategic plan goals and intends to more vigorously pursue alternate sources of funding.

Overview of Budget Cuts

The department's FY2002 budget was almost \$750,000, or 1.7%, less than what was allocated for FY2001. However, from 1997 through 2001, CCAPD's budget rose an average of 5.4% annually. These increases were necessary to merely maintain the department's status quo by meeting personnel costs associated with anniversary pay increases, cost of living increases, and health benefits. No new positions were acquired nor were operational changes made that carried major fiscal implications. In this context, the 1.7% decrease for FY2002 assumes an even greater impact.

In addition to the reduced FY2002 budget, CCAPD will be facing a decrease in state subsidies that pay for 36% (\$12.6 million) of the department's personnel appropriations. Subsidies are being reduced by 11% (\$1.4 million), which represents another 3% of the total budget and 4% of personnel costs. Probation departments throughout Illinois will be facing similar reductions in state subsidies.

Effect of Budget Cuts

These cutbacks are affecting CCAPD operations, and they may be just the beginning of what could be a long-term trend in the reduction of services throughout the county and state. The areas of operations to be most affected by this initial round of cuts include staffing, services for probationers, and training.

Staffing. The anticipated decrease in state subsidies will prohibit the department from filling a considerable number of vacancies at all levels for an indefinite period of time. Because of this, workloads are increasing, with specialized programs being hardest hit. It is becoming more difficult to maintain the smaller caseloads that are an essential component of programs that target high-risk populations such as sex offenders, perpetrators of domestic violence, offenders with serious mental illnesses, and chronic substance abusers. Establishing administrative caseloads so that resources can focus on “the more serious offenders” is not a consideration because 94% of probationers supervised by CCAPD are felons, and most have had previous involvement in the criminal justice system.

The department is trying to balance difficult choices and, where possible, address the consequences of the decisions that are made. For example, the sex offender unit does not have the capacity to handle all sex offenders in the department. Even with established eligibility criteria, there are still too many cases department-wide. Offenders not in the unit are therefore being assigned to a select group of standard caseload officers who have received specialized training. These offenders are also being supervised at the highest level within the guidelines of standard probation. Domestic violence cases are being handled in a similar matter. This is enabling the department to keep the integrity of these specialized units while providing a degree of enhanced supervision to offenders who are not in the units. This structure is also conducive to research. The department hopes to compare outcomes of similar populations of those who are receiving specialized supervision and those who are not. Findings could be an important tool for leveraging more funds to support the specialized programs, or they could indicate the need to restructure programs.

Services for probationers. A second and very serious effect of budget cuts is reduced access to services for probationers. Decreased funding within CCAPD as well as in other government and service agencies throughout the city, county, and state will make it even more difficult for probationers to access mental health treatment, substance abuse treatment, and educational/vocational programs. The need for these services is higher among offenders than in the general population, and research has shown that these types of services are critical to the rehabilitation process, as monitoring strategies alone cannot bring about meaningful change in offenders’ behavior.

In CCAPD, budget cuts are placing further restrictions on the number and size of contracts the department has with outside agencies that provide services for probationers. The department must now use probation fees to pay for services previously funded largely through the department’s budget. Hence, to continue

the same level of services, CCAPD will have to substantially increase the collection of probation fees. With 57% of those supervised having annual incomes of less than \$10,000, it will be challenging to ensure that probationers receive necessary services such as sex offender treatment, domestic violence counseling, substance abuse treatment, and educational/vocational services.

Training. A third area affected by budget cuts that could impact operations is staff training. The department's training budget was reduced by 24% in FY2002. To try to offset this, CCAPD will work more closely with other criminal justice and social service agencies within and outside the county to conduct joint training sessions. Sharing training costs with other agencies that have similar needs makes sense in any climate, but it has become particularly important given the current economic circumstances. The department will also be looking to develop and better utilize in-house trainers.

Other Changes

To meet the challenges presented by budget constraints, CCAPD is also shifting the focus of department goals. For the most part, CCAPD will shift from creating new programs and services to increasing accountability and efficiency within existing programs, including doing a better job of defining and tracking outcomes. Having research that shows the positive effects of our work can be an important tool for leveraging funds. Likewise, programs having minimal positive effects must be identified and either redesigned or discontinued. Also, consistent with the "Broken Windows" model of probation, the department will establish more partnerships in the community to collaboratively address the many challenges of supervising probationers and of helping them make positive changes in their lives.

The few new programmatic initiatives that are being pursued will be planned so that no additional resources are needed. One example in CCAPD is the female caseload pilot program called POWER (Promotion of Women through Education and Resources). Officers in this unit will not have reduced caseloads, but they will receive special training and will run peer-support groups that will replace individual face-to-face contacts with an officer every other month. By having this structured group reporting, which will have educational and social support components, the department hopes to improve the quality and effectiveness of officer interactions without spending additional money. The unit will also seek assistance from other service providers to help with the groups and to form stronger links to services for the probationers.

Another CCAPD strategy to mitigate budget cuts will be an increased effort to collect probation fees. In addition to paying for services for probationers, revenues can be used for staff training and equipment. The department's strategy of sending letters to probationers who are delinquent in payments will be enhanced with efforts to better inform the judiciary about the importance of ordering fees. Currently, fees are only assessed on approximately 40% of cases in CCAPD. The department also plans to do more tracking and benchmarking of

collection rates by supervisory unit as opposed to simply looking at collection rates in the department as a whole.

Probation fees provide a significant source of funding and play a role in offender accountability, as well. Although probation fees should be assessed and collected, it is important to remain wary of the potential problem of becoming too dependent on fees and losing a focus on what probation should be about. Acting as a collection agency at the expense of other probation duties defeats the purpose of collecting the fees in the first place. Another danger that departments must be wary of is setting probationers up to fail by ordering fees they cannot afford. This is not only counterproductive for the probationer but can be costly in terms of the time and resources it takes to conduct violation proceedings. However, when a balance is maintained and fees are judiciously assessed, probation fees can be an important means for improving services and the effectiveness of supervision.

Grant funding is another alternate source of support that will be more aggressively targeted by CCAPD, although this has its drawbacks as well. One limitation is that many grants require matching funds, which can be problematic in the context of tight budgets. Another and perhaps a bigger roadblock is that most grants want recipients to be able to demonstrate sustainability. Hence, to get funding, an agency may need already to have considerable resources. Even if demonstrating sustainability is not required by the grant, the value of receiving money that can establish but will not continue a program is questionable. Given the budget constraints facing Cook County, CCAPD will not pursue grants that pay for staff positions but will focus its attention on grants that can be used to supplement existing programs and structures.

For more information:

*Veronica S. Ballard
Chief Probation Officer
and*

*Michael Bacula
Executive Assistant
Cook County Adult Probation
Department
69 West Washington Street
Suite 2000
Chicago, Illinois 60602
Telephone: 312-603-0258
Fax: 312-603-9992
E-mail:
mibacul@cookcountygov.com*

Budget cuts facing CCAPD may not be as severe as those being faced by other departments, but they are affecting operations and may be long-term. In an effort to continue providing effective services, the department is adjusting goals and pursuing alternate sources of funding, including probation fees and grants. Current goals do not include the development of new programs that require additional resources. Instead, emphasis is being placed on collaborating with other agencies and on increasing efficiency and accountability, which includes defining, measuring, and reporting outcomes. These outcomes must be a measure of how the department's work is enhancing public safety and improving the quality of life for probationers, their families, and the community as a whole. ■